

Chodofu, Natto and Camembert—Taiwan, An Interesting Cultural Crossroads

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After living for several years in Japan, where I met my wife more than 20 years ago, and then spending a great part of our life together in Paris, here we are in Taiwan, where we have been living for some time. Although Taiwan is an island with a complex relationship with mainland China and whose history has crossed paths with Japan, many French people still could not locate it on a map. However, since the 1970s, it has come to symbolize economic success and has recently acquired the latest technology in high-speed trains—the shinkansen.

A Taiwanese friend recently described this special relationship between Taiwan and Japan using the expression ‘estranged brothers,’ which to my mind symbolizes the differences between the Taiwanese and Japanese quite well. In fact, haven’t we celebrated 2007 as the Year of the Pig in Taiwan and the Year of the Boar in Japan? The similarities and differences between Taiwan and Japan are often amusing and sometimes lead me to comparisons with France where I live most of the time. I discovered them while travelling across Taiwan, which the first Portuguese explorers called Formosa, meaning beautiful in Portuguese.

During my first days in Taiwan, I wandered a short way from my hotel to take some fresh air and explore the neighbourhood. In amazement, I came upon one of those lively night markets that make Westerners realize they really are in the orient. A great number of exotic stands offered an extraordinary choice of perfumes, colours and, most importantly foods, which people rushed to eat, because there’s at least one thing Taiwanese care about as much as French—their stomachs. While French people love to eat, they usually do it at really specific hours and people who have lived in France will tell you how hard it can be to get lunch outside the classical lunch break from noon to 14:00. This doesn’t happen in Taiwan where you can eat at any hour of the day and until very late at night. Taiwanese dishes are so diverse that it’s hard to know them all, but there is one every foreigner who has spent any time here will remember. It is a dish whose odor attacks the nose with a strong and stinky smell—a dish to wake the dead that is called *chodofu*. In fact, it is nothing more than fermented *tofu* bean curd but very few people, except the Taiwanese, enjoy it. To escape the unpleasant

smell during my walks, I picked up the habit of spotting chodofu street vendors and positioning myself upwind to avoid the smell. But thinking more deeply about it, this is just a matter of custom and culture. In fact, chodofu, a runny French camembert cheese, and Japanese *natto* fermented sticky soybeans all have a smell and aspect that repulses some foreigners while being relished by the natives. But make no mistake, each dish shows pride in the cuisine of each country. When living in Japan, I was often asked if I liked natto by people anticipating my answer with wry delight. And here in Taiwan, people play the same trick with chodofu. As for me—how many times did I mischievously offer a piece of a runny stinky camembert to foreign friends visiting Paris?



Chodofu seller at a night market in Taipei

(Author)



Cheese selection and camemberts selection in a Parisian market

(Author)



Natto sold in a box, ready to eat with mustard and sauce.

(Author)

As I have said, Taiwanese love eating and there are an incredible number of Japanese eating establishments, especially *shabu-shabu* restaurants, in Taiwan. For the

non-connoisseur, shabu-shabu consists of placing a bowl of hot broth over a burner in the center of a table. Each guest cooks thin slices of meat (usually beef) and small vegetable pieces in the stock and then eats them piece-by-piece. In Japan, it is a popular and hearty winter dish that I ate often, but Taiwan has no cold winters so shabu-shabu eaten is during the extreme heat of summer. And it's an understatement to say Taiwanese like to eat or drink things extremely hot. If you're not careful you'll end up rushing to the cold tap after taking the first bite, because all food is served hot enough to burn your tongue. This is also a common sight in Japan where I remember being astonished at the scene of some employees seated in the burning summer sun slurping up noodles in scalding soup. I brought this Japanese slurping habit back to France but now I usually stop as soon as I sense the reproving looks around me.

Finally, if you're more of a prepacked food enthusiast or just looking for a can opener at 03:00, Japanese-style *conbini* (convenience stores) are ubiquitous in Taiwan. These handy shops are open day and night and sell almost everything. This Japanese system most often surprises French people, but the Taiwanese adopted it quickly.

Taiwan is also an island where people always seem to be on the move. In the cities, the motor scooter is transportation king. And the scooter is a little like chodofu—some like it, some hate it. Those who don't like it are usually foreigners, because they feel they are risking their lives whenever they cross the street and a scooter speeds by. I wonder what other transportation mode could compete with these spluttering machines. It is said that each Taiwanese family owns two scooters on average, meaning there are 10 million scooters running around the island. They're often used to transport the entire family with wife and children all packed precariously on one vehicle. Scooters rule the Taiwanese streets and although the Taiwanese are often very polite in their relationships, they drive scooters and cars with little courtesy or rules—rather like Parisians!

However, Taipei does benefit from a quite exceptional brand-new subway network of amazing cleanliness, because eating, chewing gum, and smoking are all completely forbidden. Platforms are spacious and everyone waits politely in line like in Tokyo, but not in Paris.

Taiwan's almond shape with Taipei in the north and Kaohsiung—the second economic centre—in the south, increases the length of business trips. Like any railway fan, right from my first days in Taiwan I took the opportunity to use the local railway, first opened in 1887. To be on the safe side, for a trip to the south, I made a reservation, because the train leaving Taipei is as crowded as Tokyo's Yamanote Line in the worst rush hour. Fortunately, Taiwanese do not travel like the French who carry huge amounts of luggage as soon as they leave home for more than 2 days. The Taiwanese are used to travelling light and seated or standing in the corridor, everyone waits

for the cart selling lunchboxes, which reminds me of the famous Japanese train *bento* lunchbox. After gulping down the contents and throwing the container in a trash bin pushed through the corridors by a young employee, I sank back into my seat ready to sleep. That's when my neighbour, a student of English from Taipei, told me to put my ticket in a little case close to my shelf, visible to everyone so I would not be disturbed by the ticket inspector. What a strange feeling for a French railwayman who's familiar with the many fare-dodgers on SNCF to leave his ticket unsupervised. After some hesitation and so that I wouldn't look like I was from another planet, I took my neighbour's advice but was unable to close my eyes! Travelling by train definitely gives a quick insight into the people as well as the region you're crossing.

Since Taiwan has an excellent—although congested—highway network, a few days later, I decided to make the return 350-km trip back to Taipei by bus. The place where my bus was waiting looked more like an airport than a bus terminal. The charming hostess who showed me to my reserved seat could well have worked for a big airline company, and my first-class seat was as comfortable as anywhere else. In front of me was a personal TV screen worthy of NASA with a remote control so complicated that it took me the entire trip to figure out how it worked. From my seat, I could see the driver wearing a very natty uniform, cap, and spotless white gloves. This is rather strange to a Frenchman, but not to the Japanese where every service worker wears a spotless uniform. For example, the caretaker of the building where I live in Taiwan is dressed like an army general and I almost want to salute him each time I meet him when he takes the garbage out.

To be frank, I preferred the train and its rocking movement as well as the proximity of passengers with whom I can share my trip over that magnificent bus with its rather impersonal comfort. I like trains so much that the next time I make the same trip across Taiwan, I'll use the new high-speed line with Japanese 700T shinkansen trains, proving that even the railway world can't escape the pleasant crossroads of cultures in Taiwan.



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